Interpretive Values and Cultural Landscapes

An Australian Perspective

Ken Taylor

Images of landscape are central to what it means to be Australian.[1] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the concept and meaning behind the term "cultural landscape" has found a widespread community, as well as professional acceptance.[2]

The recognition over the past decade that cultural landscapes are rich historical documents forming a significant part of Australia's cultural heritage has been notable. It can be linked to the burgeoning enthusiasm for Australia's cultural heritage and also the understanding that heritage as a concept involves a set of values as well as conservation of places, buildings, and objects.[3] Australians have increasingly discovered over the past 20 years that 200 years since European settlement have left a coherent historical pattern reflecting cultural associations and values, with the landscape as human setting. We also have started to appreciate the role of the natural landscape of this ancient continent with its unique flora and fauna and the fact that it has been shaped by the management practices of Aboriginal Australians for 40,000 years or more. Indeed, in tracking the approbation of the post-1788 explorers and settlers with the open, park-like, savannah woodland landscapes, we see that these were the very landscapes created by millennia of Aboriginal management through burning.

It is intriguing to contemplate the two cultures—Aboriginal and European—with parallel landscape-making traditions, the major difference being that the Aboriginal people saw themselves as an essential part of the created world. They burnt and managed the landscape, but within a value system that made no distinction between cultural and natural. Europeans saw the Aboriginal park-like landscape as the epitome of the picturesque, but also functionally with a view to profiting from what they perceived as limitless grazing potential.

Assessment of Cultural Significance

There has been a remarkable widening of conservation practice from the 1970s and earlier when the primary concentration was on high art/high aesthetic buildings connected with the rich and famous—sometimes known iconoclastically as the Great White House syndrome—to include the ordinary, the everyday. Coincidental with this approach, and with unmistaken theoretical links, is the emphasis in Australian practice of referring to the conservation of places rather than sites, buildings, or monuments. For example, the Australian Heritage Commission[4] Act (1975) defines the National Estate as:

Lanyon historic rural landscape, Australian Capital Territory.

Port Arthur penitentiary ruins and Commandant's house. Photo by author.

Remains of the 1836 stone church at Port Arthur. Photo by author.

> *those places, being components of the natural environment of Australia, or the cultural environment of Australia, that have aesthetic, historic, scientific, or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community*.

Integral to this definition is the interpretive value of places of heritage significance, and what is revealed of Australian social history. The concept behind the term "place," therefore, has associated cultural context and meaning, linking their cultural and intellectual backgrounds. Places—cultural landscapes—are a way of seeing, not something which is simply seen as a physical object or objects.

The Australia ICOMOS *Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (The Burra Charter)* through its "Guidelines on Cultural Significance" adopts the term "place." The Burra Charter and its Guidelines present a philosophy and methodology for conservation which link management of places of cultural significance to the assessment of cultural values. Particularly notable for cultural landscapes and interpretive value is that the assessment and management process is a particularly appropriate one to address living sites where a sense of continuity, interrelationships, and layering are recognizable. The assessment and management process recognizes and embraces, therefore, the idea of meaning of places. Notably, *The Burra Charter* defines cultural significance as:

> *…a concept which helps in estimating the value of the place. The places that are likely to be of significance are those which help an understanding of the past or enrich the present, and which will be of value to future generations.*

The Guidelines propose that the concept and assessment of cultural significance are related to the identification of four values: (1) aesthetic value, including aspects of sensory perception; (2) historic value, which relates to events, places, and people; (3) scientific value; and, (4) social value, embracing spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment.

It is recognized in the *Burra Charter* that other value categories may be developed to understand a place better. My experience suggests that what I call **interpretive** value is a particularly useful additional category in conservation studies. My definition of interpretive value is:

> *the ability of a landscape to inform and enlighten us on social history, promote a sense of place feeling, create links with the past; it is an understanding of what has occurred, when things have occurred, who was involved, and why things have occurred. It enhances the feeling of participation—we could have been involved—in the making of a particular place.*

Conservation studies with a sequential study method of identification, assessment, and evaluation leading to a statement of significance are a means of substantiating a basis for conservation planning and management. The introduction of interpretive value early in the study process is integral to the assignment of heritage value and the determination of significance.

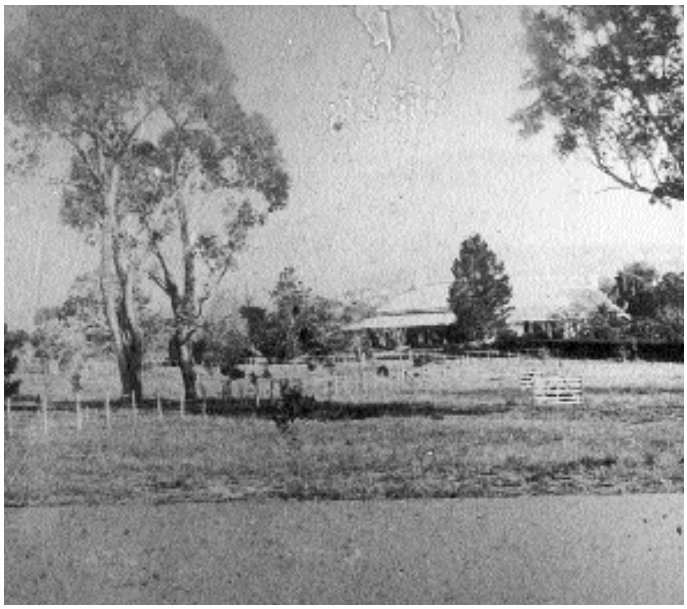
Themes Reflecting Social History

A professional emphasis exists on themes through history which embrace the totality of places, people, and events through time. Examples of historical themes which summarize human development of an area or region with associated interpretive values include: exploration and pioneering, settlement, convictism, pastoralism, rural technology, transportation, forestry, communication, and mining.

It is notable that many of these themes also contribute to European ideas of national identity. They are used effectively at a number of heritage places in Australia as an essential part of their interpretation, where the place is interpreted and presented in its wider context. Interpretation includes national, as well as regional and local contexts, presenting accumulative meanings and promoting a sense of participation for visitors. Context is a particularly important aspect of

*(**Taylor—**continued on page 18)*

Rear courtyard at Lanyon Homestead. Building at left is c. 1838 stone farmhouse with convict bell at apex of gable wall facing camera. The bell was used to waken convict labourers. Photo by author.



Approach drive and front paddocks of Lanyon Homestead c. 1875. Photo by author.

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interpretive value where visitors to heritage places process information and use their imagination and own experiences in order to attach meaning.

Alternatively, there are historic places in Australia where the interpretation specifically sets out to reveal meanings and context as part of the presentation of places, people, and events through time. Port Arthur, the notorious convict prison complex in Tasmania established in the early-19th century and Australia's most famous historic site, skillfully puts into context Australia's convict history and social organization. The site is isolated on the rugged coast of the Tasman Peninsula. The prison ruins stand evocatively in the middle of a scene of outstanding natural beauty emphasizing the hopeless isolation of the site. Professional archeological work is convincingly used to interpret the site in a manner that provokes visitor reaction and participation without lapsing into a didactic experience.

The prison was finally closed in 1877. Until 1947 the buildings deteriorated or were dismantled for their materials, in particular handmade bricks and stone. Building remains such as the 1836 stone church, the brick 1848 penitentiary and later model prison, finely built in stone, have been stabilized as part of a major restoration project. The presentation of the stabilized complex creates a vivid sense of understanding the harsh reality of the penal system and the cruelty of the model prison where inmates were not allowed to see each other or to communicate. Coincidental is the understanding that this was a place where free immigrants lived and worked as part of the organization.

Lanyon Homestead, some 30 kilometers from the center of Canberra, the national capital, is recognized as one of Australia's outstanding historic places. It consists of a building cluster dating from 1834 and a surrounding area of 1500 hectares of pastoral land which retains components from the early European settlement. Evidence of earlier Aboriginal occupation also is available. An early dairy and stone building from the 1830s still stand next to the 1859 homestead of considerably grander construction. Nearby is the 1830s convict overseer's cottage and the dairy cattle barn. The pastoral landscape still reflects 19th-century patterns overlain by 20th-century developments. The whole is a remarkable window into Australia's pastoral past. The 1859 Homestead and other buildings are open to the public through the Australian Capital Territory Museums Unit. The pastoral landscape is still operational on a lease. A few years ago, to complete the sense of continuity and layers in the landscape, the interpretive program expanded the narrative to include this century under the title "Lanyon in Living Memory" involving local people who had lived, were born, or worked at Lanyon. As a result, visitors to Lanyon leave with a broadened perspective—that they could have been involved in the making of the landscape, such is its interpretive value based on archeological work and archival material.

Notes

[1, 2] Taylor, K., (1992), "A Symbolic Australian Landscape: Images in Writing and Painting," *Landscape Journal* XI:2; pp. 127-143.

[2] In a recent research project the author found over 500 cultural landscapes classified by five out of eight National Trust of Australia State and Territory groups.

[3] Note the term 'heritage conservation' is used in Australia, not 'historic preservation.'

[4] The Australian Heritage Commission is a Commonwealth agency which maintains the Register of the National Estate, administers the National Estate Grants Program, undertakes education programs and offers conservation advice to Commonwealth Government Departments.

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